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# Zen and the Art of Classroom Identity Formation

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**Abstract**

This essay is an exploration of teacher identity and the discomfort that arises from the notion of the 'professional self' and the 'personal self.' Drawing on a range of scholarship that discusses the complexities of teacher-identity construction, I consider how institutional hierarchies, Enlightenment-era thought, and student perception affect our self-construction in the classroom. Too often teachers try to live up to contradictory cultural ideals, which makes the process of professional self-construction in the classroom even more complicated. As such, I explore the notion of teacher identity development from the perspectives of those starting out in the profession and as well as experienced educators. I argue that problem of teacher identity development does not necessarily come to end as an educator grows more experienced.

**Introduction**

Many years ago, when I was about to walk into the classroom to teach for the first time, a colleague smiled warmly and gave me a piece of advice. 'Just be yourself,' she said. I remember smiling back and politely thanking her for the advice, but at the same time thinking that this was yet another platitude—an affirmation that well-meaning people supplied when they wanted very much to be helpful, but knew they couldn't be. What if 'being myself 'means that I'm not a very good teacher? And what does 'being myself' mean in any case? Many of us are self-conscious when we teach. We worry about our figures of speech, how we dress, our demeanor. We are conscious of ourselves as being an entity 'other' than our students. At the end of each class, we are left with lingering doubts—should I have said that? Was that joke inappropriate? Did I offend anyone when I did this? Was I too harsh? Too soft? To what can we attribute this discomfort? Is it simply that the split between student and teacher seems too wide; the distinction between those identities too pronounced? Are we being too much ourselves or not enough ourselves?

In her work on teacher identity, Janet Alsup observes that teachers who perceive a more nebulous difference between the personal and the professional tend to be more enthusiastic about teaching than those who perceive a more clearly defined difference. For the teacher who doesn't see much difference between the personal and professional, 'embodying' a teacher-identity is easier (Alsup, 2005 p.90). Since this 2005 publication many scholars have written about teacher identity development and the perceived tension between personal and professional identities. For instance, in recent years, Lindquist et al. have considered strategies used by student teachers to 'resolve' professional discomfort through 'modifying professional ideals, dependence on future

colleagues and continuing to build experience' (Lindquist et al 2017, p. 270). This research suggests that, gaining enough experience and setting more realistic goals for oneself would necessarily result in feeling less discomfort—however, the professors whose personal accounts I reference here were all experienced teachers when they wrote about their own discomfort. These three scholars are all renowned for their work in pedagogy—Parker Palmer who is described as an 'educator, author, and activist' is currently Senior Partner Emeritus of the Center for Courage & Renewal. Jane Tompkins, now retired from Duke University where she held a position as a professor of literature is widely considered to be a significant critical theorist, and Robert Yagelski, currently the director of the Writing Programs at the University of Albany is widely considered an expert in writing pedagogy within the field of rhetoric and composition.

In their work on teacher identity development, Lindquist et al point out that 'research focusing on coping with distressful situations during teacher education and the effect these experiences may have on teaching identity…is still scarce' (Lindquist et. al 2017, p. 270). Existing scholarship on teacher identity tells us that teaching is an emotional endeavor and that classrooms can be emotional spaces that affect a teacher's identity formation, spurring shifts in how they see themselves as teachers (Beijaard et al. 2004; Shapiro 2010). Research on the emotions a beginning teacher experiences reveals a strong connection between the teacher identity development and emotion in the classroom (Timostuk and Ugaste 2012). Some scholars suggest that developing a stable teaching identity will resolve many of the problems facing beginning teachers (Lindquist et. al 2017; Flores and Day 2006). However, other scholars suggest that it is important to account for the fact that teacher identity is not monolithic or static, and that its development is constant and context driven (Beijaard et al. 2004; Clandinin et al. 2009; McNaughton and Billot, 2016). Further, much scholarship on experienced teachers and the fluid nature of identity acknowledges the need for considering the degree to which an institution may challenge a teacher's identity development (Billot 2010). For the most part, existing research suggests that coping with discomfort in the classroom is seen to be a beginning teacher problem—however, accounts of experienced educators suggest otherwise. Specifically, Yagelski, Tompkins and Palmer's work suggests that developing and maintaining a teacher identity in some form is an enduring struggle. Somehow, the adoption of a spiritual practice—one that calls in particular for self-awareness—has been a way that these educators have attempted to assuage their discomfort and to come to terms with why, as experienced educators, they continue to feel discomfort.

In her memoir*, A Life in School*, Jane Tompkins describes how difficult it is to know oneself as a teacher—or even what pedagogical practices reflect who or what that 'self' is. Tompkins acknowledges that one thing most teachers *do* know however, is that they want to be liked. Soliciting this affection often becomes in and of itself a series of intricate and conflicting performances:

> In order to win my students' love, I would try to divest myself of authority by constant self-questioning, by deference to students' opinions; through disarming self-revelation, flattery, jokes, criticizing school authorities; by accepting late papers, late attendance and non-performance of various kinds (Tompkins, 1996, p.3).

In the meantime, Tompkins says, she found ways to compensate for this—to uphold her desire to be taken seriously by forming rigid lesson plans, grading hard and giving her students an overly heavy workload. Tompkins says that her students must have been confused by all this; and she admits that she too was confused. She was not sure how to behave—how to be a good teacher without being perceived as soft; how to be a tough while still being caring. Throughout her autobiography, Tompkins seems to be grappling with the questions of whether or not she is (or was) a 'good' teacher, but in the end is forced to acknowledge that despite all this soul-searching, the idea of being a 'good teacher' is more or less subjective.

I contend that the root of the problem that Tompkins, Palmer, and Yagelski describe is a longstanding discomfort with power and authority—discomfort about how to use it and a fear of abusing it. This emerges as Tompkins discusses her desire to give her students the freedom to be creative with their assignments, only to come to the realization that such freedom seems to correlate to a lack of academic rigor. This lack of rigor means that Tompkins then feels compelled to play the role of disciplinarian—a role that she believes stymies her relationship with her students and fails to do justice to the literature they study.

**Good Teacher/Bad Teacher**

Assumptions about who teachers *should* be perhaps make us less tolerant of their all-too-human shortcomings, and less forgiving of ourselves—if we happen to be teachers. Robert Yagelski writes that insofar as a teacher's identity can get in the way of addressing students' needs, the teacher-hero model is just as problematic for beginning teachers as that of the 'bad' teacher—the one who crushes his students' spirits (ostensibly out of malice), or simply doesn't care about them. Both 'good' and 'bad' models are problematic because both deny ambiguity—and Yagelski implies that an effective teacher embodies ambiguity. Using examples from Zen Buddhism, Yagelski explains that a student is not supposed to simply emulate his teacher (easy to do, when the teacher-model is easily defined) but to find out what is true for himself—the teacher is not meant to be seen as a kind of demi-God or savior but as a person whose pronouncements the student must continually question. In contrast to the Zen model in which students uncover their own 'truths,' the Western academic tradition (fuelled by Enlightenment-era thought) has suggested that a higher external Truth should be uncovered for us by a teacher. With a twenty-first century emphasis on student-

centered learning and critical thinking, we may believe that we have tempered this aspect of the Enlightenment-era mindset, but popular representations of teachers in Western cultures suggest otherwise. Perhaps our desire for a teacher to be a disseminator of Truth reflects our penchant for superheroes—someone who will swoop down to solve our problems and render the learning process painless. As such, teachers tend to be either extolled or demonized. Expectations for who and what teachers should be becomes too rigid. Our cultural models expect us to emulate heroism rather than to strive for the kind of self-knowledge and presence of mind that might perhaps make us better teachers.

Yagelski suggests that reading 'narratives of failure' may help beginning teachers move away from constructions of the teacher as hero, however he does offer a caveat:

> …our narratives of failure might serve simply to reinforce the idea that we didn't live up to our identities as teachers. Perhaps we need to reimagine the role of teacher in a way that doesn't simply redefine it…but questions the very role itself: a reimagining of teacher that doesn't allow us to ignore self-doubt even as we continue to believe in what we do. (Yagelski, 1999, p.46)

By this reckoning, we cannot gloss over our insecurities. We must acknowledge them while somehow continuing to be confident in our abilities as teachers. Ultimately, Yagelski suggests that in order to relinquish your self-doubt you need to somehow let go of your identity as a teacher—but how are you to do this when so much is expected of you? How are you to imagine yourself as anything other than a teacher when you are expected to lead students to places of discovery, but not interfere with the act of discovery itself? To simultaneously validate and temper the impulses of a single student who takes up too much time and space in a classroom full of other students who also require attention? To maintain order, yet allow freedom? To allow for the fact that what we understand to be discovery, validation, quashing, ordering and freeing are again, often subjective?

**Inner Life/Outer Life**

In the words of the student teacher Yagelski describes in his essay, teaching sometimes just feels like 'too much' and that's not because of the workload, it is because of the emotional toll that it takes; what it can do to one's own sense of self when one is standing in front of the classroom. Teaching gives rise to a unique crisis of self: a strange disconnect between internal and external selves. In his essay 'The Heart of a Teacher: Identity and Integrity in Teaching' Parker J. Palmer claims that the most rewarding teaching comes when one can reconcile the two selves; the teaching self and the not-teaching self in order to find a self that is either both or perhaps neither one nor the other Palmer, 1997, pp. 1-2). According to Palmer, this reconciliation occurs only through self-knowledge, arguing that if he doesn't know himself he can't know his

students and determine what they need. Similarly, Yagelski says that, according to the Buddhist model, the goal is to know yourself so that you can better get out of the students' way. Jane Tompkins also indicates the need for the teacher to remove, or decenter herself from the classroom experience: 'People's personalities won't be visible, their feelings and opinions won't surface, unless the teacher gets out of the way on a regular basis' (Tompkins, 1995, p.147). How does one do this? How does one remain present while not being there?

In examining his own ambivalence toward critical reflection and in considering the complicated psychological relationships between teacher and student, Yagelski claims that as teachers we must 'accept that we may occupy a central place in our students' lives…even as we try to move from that place' (Yagelski, 1999, p.46). To illustrate this example, Yagelski describes a Zen teacher, Daigu, who 'doesn't care whether he offends the student or whether the student likes what he has to say; his relationship with a student is not about him, but about the student's learning' (Yagelski, 1999, p.43). Of course, this is probably what the focal point of such a relationship should be; the student's learning is paramount. However, personality, character and identity all do become a major part of what goes on in the classroom. We are discouraged from being too blunt with students, lest we upset them. Often, we must prevaricate. We must help students to like what we say because we want them to be open to what we have to teach them—and it is, of course possible that all this interferes both with teaching and the cultivation of self-awareness.

While Yagelski speaks of 'getting out of the way' as being a self-sacrificial move (the Zen teacher doesn't care about being disliked or losing face as long as the student learns), Tompkins speaks of relinquishing our power over our students in an effort to help them claim their own power: 'To get out of the students' way, the teacher has to learn how to get out of her own way' (Tompkins, 1996, p.147). And how exactly does a teacher do *this*? I can imagine only that these authors refer to the process of giving up the illusion that you are in control; trying to listen to your instincts and address each student and each comment as it arises being perfectly present to each situation without worrying about long silences, appearing knowledgeable, or retaining an air of professionalism. Tompkins concedes that, given the weight of cultural expectation, this is not easy.

**Mind/Body/Spirit (?)**

The discomfort that teachers feel in the classroom reflects the tension that teachers 'often feel between their bodies and material lives and the body and life of the teacher as it has been conveyed to them through books, movies, classes and other cultural texts' (Alsup, 2005, p.105). These tensions must somehow be negotiated…but how? How does one try to integrate the fragmented identities arising from conflicting cultural and professional expectations? Lee Shulman asserts that beyond dualistic assumptions of a personal and professional self, there is a 'deeper set of principles through which the

dichotomy could be resolved' (Shulman, 1988, p.33). While Shulman does not specify what that 'deeper set of principles' is with respect to identity-building, Palmer, Tompkins, and Yagelski suggest that a 'deeper set of principles' relates to spirituality. Palmer speaks of teaching 'from an integral and undivided self' (Palmer, 1997, p.3) and emphasizes the importance of this integration in order to connect with integrity to students. He says, 'There are no techniques for reclaiming our hearts, for keeping our hearts open. Indeed, the heart does not seek 'fixes' but insight and understanding' (Palmer, 1997, p.10). In a similar vein, Tompkins paints the quest for authenticity and self-awareness in the classroom as a spiritual venture, and Yagelski repeatedly references Zen Buddhism when discussing his teaching practice. There is a spiritual dimension to teaching and learning, they say, one that helps to integrate the personal and the professional.

Hence, writers such as Tompkins, Palmer, and Yagelski sidestep the idea of a mind/body split—the notion of the ordinary 'self' versus the 'self' one performs while teaching— to include a third dimension: the spirit. Tompkins addresses the notion of the divisions between mind, body, and spirit, emphasizing that for many years she felt as if her mind, body, and spirit were disconnected. She writes that years spent stocking her mind detracted from both her spiritual and physical needs—and in many ways she still struggles to reclaim them, both inside and outside the classroom:

> Becoming more aware of my physical and spiritual needs, and more aware of my surroundings has made me more skeptical about the way we teach our students inside colleges and universities. There's too much emphasis on matters related exclusively to the head and not enough attention given to nurturing the attitudes and faculties that make of knowledge something useful and good (Tompkins, 1996, 206).

Later, Tompkins alludes to practices that set her on the path to self-knowledge, the practices that helped her to cultivate enough self-awareness to remove herself from the center of classroom discourse in order to create a more democratic and student-centered classroom. A classroom in which—often for the first time—students were asked to find personal connection to the texts they read, to make meaning of what they were studying by relating it to their own experience. As such, Tompkins suggests that academe, the very institution that strives to separate the personal from the professional, the outer life from the inner, the head from the heart, should be the primary means by which the spirit is found to link all these elements. It is only in these connections that we can find 'wholeness'; to cultivate authentic (and therefore meaningful) human interaction in the classroom. Yet, we often avoid these exchanges because they can be unpredictable, and therefore risky. When discussing the inner and outer, the 'dangerous' intersection between the personal and professional, Palmer describes how 'we build a wall between inner truth and outer performance, and we

play-act the teacher's part' (Pamer, 1997, p.11). We are encouraged to do so, Palmer says, 'by an academic culture that distrusts personal truth' (Palmer, 1997, p.11). For Palmer, the personal and the professional should be integrated. If they are not, then one is simply 'play-acting' a part. And, like Palmer, Yagelski, and Tompkins suggest that they overcame their own discomfort through a process of self-knowledge that they eventually attributed to some kind of spiritual practice.

But the message here is not that everyone who experiences discomfort in the classroom should rush out and develop a spiritual practice—although apparently (to some extent) it has worked for the three people I discuss here. Rather, it is to understand that such discomfort with trying to reconcile seemingly conflicting values and 'selves' is not a personal failing—and neither is feeling self-conscious in front of a room full of partial strangers. This discomfort does not necessarily arise because we are ineffective. Rather, it is the institutions in which we work that have cultivated such conflict within and between us, and we must find ways to overcome this conflict.

When you become a teacher, the 'self' you are in the classroom is not a self that is entirely of your own making. To some degree, students construct your identity in the classroom and you shape your identity according to their expectations. In turn, you create your students' identities. You do so through an intricate system of cultural commonplaces and social norms that—try as you might—you just can't avoid: the expressions on students' faces, the clothing they wear, the way they address you and their classmates—and indeed, whether they choose to speak at all. Furthermore, once the initial dichotomy has been determined (Teacher/Student), other binaries (oppressor/oppressed, good/bad, mind/body) must necessarily follow, until not only is the teacher-self fundamentally severed from a corresponding student-self, but all classroom selves become fragmented and objectified. That is, you wish to be all things to all people—to give each student (not to mention your institution) the kind of instructor you believe that *they* want. You know that your institution has endowed you with a certain kind of power—but have you earned that power? Do your students respect you? What about your colleagues? Do you respect yourself? How much authority do you have?

Tompkins, Palmer, and Yagelski describe a problem of power and authority. Jane Tompkins struggles to relinquish authority, yet realizes that in doing so she is inadvertently accepting 'non-performance' on the part of the students and not doing justice to the literature she is teaching. Yagelski exhibits a similar discomfort in his adherence to Buddhism in which the student is urged not to be dependent on his master and to forge his own path. He tries to shed the trappings of authority—trappings that perhaps his students would prefer because, after all, his authority is perhaps more comfortable for *them*. Finally, Parker Palmer comes the closest to describing the

relationship of fragmented self to the problem of how to responsibly occupy a position of power.

Palmer equates a fragmentation of self to death; asserting that the fragmentation of identities is inimical to all that is 'natural and whole'—an integrated being. 'By choosing integrity, I become more whole, but wholeness does not mean perfection. It means becoming more real by acknowledging the whole of who I am' (Palmer, 1997, p.7). According to Palmer, knowing oneself means that one can claim authority, which is essential to effective pedagogy. Outlining the difference between power and authority, he writes: 'Power works from the outside in, but authority works from the inside out' (Palmer, 1997, p. 15). That is, authority is one's own confidence, the sense of self one gains from being a fully integrated 'whole self' whereas power is simply the station that we occupy. Still, the notion of the 'whole self' and 'being yourself' may seem hopelessly vague to someone stepping into a classroom to teach for the first time—and perhaps no less vague to the teacher stepping into a classroom for the hundredth time.

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